

# TALKING TEXTILES

ISSUE 7

*character*





creation **Spandita Malik**  
text **Sagarika Sundaram**

# NEEDLEPOINT ACTIVISM



It takes more than a second glance to notice the embroidered details in these fabric portraits, details added by their subjects. Only after one month did photographer Spandita Malik notice that underneath the black knitted patch that her subject Fozia chose as a veil to cover the printed images

of her face, she added several shades of flesh-coloured skein to cast highlights and shadows across the skin. Across her hands she sewed a diagonal grid in a deep maroon henna design. Fozia also included a celebratory frame for her portrait, composed of flowers dancing around the portrait in a floral rectangle.

Left: Jyoti Ramesh Kumar, 2020 (Series: Nai 2019 Opening) - photographic transfer print on khadder fabric, abukari silk thread embroidery - Size: 40 x 40 inch - unique edition  
Right: Jyoti Ramesh Kumar, 2021 (Series: Vaidh 2021) - photographic transfer print on khadder fabric, abukari silk thread embroidery - 26.5 x 40 inch - unique edition





Left page Kiran Ovi II, 2021 (Series: Yashu 2021) - photographic transfer print on khaddar fabric, phulkari silk thread embroidery - 20.5 x 26 inch - unique edition  
 Right page Praveen Devi II, 2021 (Series: Yashu 2021) - photographic transfer print on khaddar fabric, phulkari silk thread embroidery - 37.5 x 30.5 inch - unique edition



Malik radically disrupts the canon of photography through portraiture and embroidery, unravelling a deep research-based artistic engagement with rape culture in India over multiple bodies of work. Malik's work documents intimate stories of survivors of domestic abuse with whom she forms relationships through women's self-help groups. She prints their portraits onto fabrics such as *khadi* that are deeply connected to the country's history of colonialism and economic reform. She then invites her subjects to embroider their own image, creating space for them to have authority and agency over their own portrayal. Her sitters employ a range of techniques such as *zardozi*, *phulkari*, and *chikankari* that are typically passed on from mother to daughter. Malik says, 'When I started, I was just documenting

the lives of the women I met. But now they are my collaborators. We're building a language together...'

Malik's approach decolonises the *œuvre* of the imagery of India, which even now is often limited to picturesque images of poverty captured by the frame of the outsider looking in. Through the act of embroidery, Malik opens a space for vulnerable conversations on domestic abuse, poverty and childcare. She says, 'While gendered violence is hardly exclusive to one country or culture, India bears particularly ghastly symptoms of it. The lack of political outrage for women's rights after the major gang rape case known as Nirbhaya, made me very aware of the injustice and inequality in Indian society. Through my work I feel urged to shed light on the stories of women.'

**in this project, if a photograph conveys an unspoken message suggesting 'this is how I see you', the needlework answers, 'this is who I am'**



left page Rakshen Kumari II, 2021 (Series: Vadiu 2021) - photographic transfer print on khaddar fabric; ghulkari silk thread embroidery - 27 x 40 inch - unique edition  
right page Raza, 2019 (Series: Nari 2019-Durga) - photographic transfer print on shadi; embroidery - 23 x 19 inch - unique edition

